

OUTSIDE

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About the Author

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I AM SPENDING my nights on a couch inside an apartment in Briarwood, Queens. My aunt, who lives in Tel Aviv, has asked her friend Elijah to let me stay over while I look for a place. They met in Israel, before Elijah moved to Queens. I arrived just a few days ago after a twenty-one-hour flight from Manila to Los Angeles, and then to New York City.

“I talked to your aunt on the phone,” Elijah says to me one afternoon, grabbing a paper cutter to open a package he picked up at his door. “She said your mother in the Philippines is calling you, but you don’t answer. She said your mother is crying all day because she’s worried. You don’t answer her call.”

I am uneasy, embarrassed. My mother is not one to cry.

I go outside and buy a phone card. Back in Davao City, it is three a.m. My mother groggily answers, telling me she hasn’t spoken with my aunt in months. I am walking to the subway, early for my next class.

Elijah is mid-fifties, divorced, drives a limo around Manhattan. He is heavyset, furry around the forearms, crams his dining table with hand tools and empty boxes from Amazon or UPS. Because of the gruff, skeptical tone he usually favors, whatever Elijah says often sounds like disapproval. He is a man fond of drama.

When I return to Elijah’s apartment at night, he invites me to dinner. He made beef stew with large cubes of potatoes, generously spiced with cinnamon. We eat in front of a giant flat screen TV in his living room; he watches a Clint Eastwood movie, while I sit in awe of the uncanny polish of American commercials. He tells me about a conversation he just had with a Muslim friend from work.

“God was on the side of the Jews first, this guy is saying, but he said we fucked that up. Then God went to the Christians, but you fucked it up. So now, this guy said, God is on the side of Muslims. You believe this?” He chuckles. “You believe this?”

Soon Elijah is asking me about what I think so far of New York, being away from my country of birth. I politely swallow the potatoes, trying not to mind the cinnamon.

“When you are ready,” he says, “we should find a job for you.”

I explain to him the terms of my scholarship, the limitations of the type of visa the American government has granted me.

He flicks his hand, as if shooing a bug.

“This is New York. You can’t live here without a job.”

“Maybe I can apply for a teaching assistantship,” I say. A teaching assistantship is one of the few negotiable employment options that my J1 visa allows.

Lines appear on Elijah’s forehead, the same way he creased his brows some nights ago when I told him that I’m studying to become a writer. Later that same night, he asked me if I’ve been to the Filipino neighborhood on Roosevelt Avenue. “So many different people here,” he said. “It is like the world became very small.”

Elijah is seeing a schoolteacher named Carla. Carla reads poetry to underprivileged kids in Washington Heights and lives upstairs with her eighty-year-old mother and their four cats. Every night she would join us for dinner. Once during a conversation, Carla objected to my use of the word “colonize” to describe the Philippines’ history with America.

“I don’t remember reading books that said America conquered other countries,” she said after I tell her about The Treaty of Paris, the twenty million dollars America paid Spain, McKinley’s “benevolent assimilation.”

When Carla’s visits become rare, Elijah confesses, not without amusement, that his girlfriend is jealous. Before I came, Elijah’s son stayed more than a year in the apartment before flying back to Tel Aviv. Carla feels it’s the same thing all over again: her boyfriend fathering another young man instead of attending to her.

One night without Carla, Elijah warns me about homosexuals. He tells me about a young man he knows from work who, during New Year’s Eve, went to a bar patronized by gay men. The man, says Elijah, was found on the street the following day, unconscious and naked in the snow, bleeding from the anus.

Elijah is a kind, lonesome man who treats me like a son. When I tell him I’ve found a place in East Harlem, he says, “Why rush? Stay a couple more weeks.” I know him well enough by now to recognize a simple request, but I can’t wait to leave his apartment.

“Move out,” says a friend I met in one of my classes. “If living with him makes you uncomfortable, move out as soon as you can.” I admire her pragmatism, her straight-talking American style. But I don’t have the heart to tell Elijah that I too am a homosexual.

THE DAY I FIND the room in East Harlem, I'm nearing collapse. I've lost my way twice before making the right transfer from the F to the 6 on Lexington. When the landlord meets me outside the building, kindness radiates from him that I want to drink from it.

The apartment is on the fourth floor of an eight-story building, Tito Puente's side of Harlem, a one-bedroom space converted into three. The building is old. We don't have an elevator. The heater drips. Sometimes water slinks its way to the papers under the bed, rubbing off my classmates' ugly cursive on the margins of my drafts.

Almost each month the building's front doors break, slivers of wood or metal jammed against the latch. Some days the hard glass panels crack, bashed with a blunt object. Once after class, three men wearing ski masks trail me back to the building. They get past the first door, pound against the second as I pass the mailboxes in the hallway. Over the phone, my landlord assures me I'll be fine. Stay inside. Lock the apartment. Maybe they live in the building. Maybe they left their keys. But I couldn't take a chance. I am new and everything terrifies me.

The Turkish woman I share the apartment with refuses to leave her room even though she has stopped paying rent. When he can't anymore stand her weeping, our landlord starts carrying her things out of the apartment. She asks help from a co-worker at the deli where she works as the cashier. The man goes to our place, posing as a lawyer, and invokes the rights of tenants in New York City. She threatens to report our landlord to "the office," where they can prove, she claims, that the apartment is not in his name. He gives her two months to find another place; she leaves after three. The first time we met she asked if the Philippines was in Africa.

I sublet from an Argentinian man who inherited the apartment from a friend, a retired police officer. My landlord lives in Florida with his family, but he comes to the city sometimes, driving a fourteen-hour carpool for extra cash. He was a pilot in his home country. One night, he finds me wandering between 116th and 117th. He invites me to an apartment he's watching over. The owners, he says, are in Argentina for a family reunion.

"My brother-in-law is Filipino, you know?" he says as we sit in the kitchen. "I want to say first I met you but I forgot. He speaks Spanish little bit but funny."

Over coffee, he tells me that he swam across the Rio Grande, only to have border patrol catch up with him panting in the woods near San Antonio. As the guards descended upon him, he thought of his wife and their three children; he had left them in a farm in Mexico, waiting for his call once he arrived in the States. Gasping

for air, he slipped back to the weeks when he drove his family from Tucumán to a seaport in Colombia in a minivan, which they sold at the last port before entering Central America. His family would find him in a detention center. They would be granted exile. He would become a building superintendent in Harlem. I would locate the address on Craigslist.

At some point he asks me how I'm doing, if I miss my family. He has a strong slender beak, brown eyes, soft dark hair waving over his large ears, a rustic handsomeness that's only beginning to fade. I tell him that I'm doing okay, even if I miss home, I love every minute of being here.

"I understand what you mean," says my landlord. "But you promise one thing. You don't become like them."

"Them?" I ask.

"I notice people who live here for a long time," he says, "they start to act serious, maybe rude. They walk in the street with a hard face. They walk and they don't see the other people anymore and they bump them. They don't care about the other people. They walk straight, maybe worried about something. The city can make the people act this way. This is why I moved to Florida. You promise you don't become like this."

I make a promise that I'll try.

TO START THE DISCUSSION of my story, the instructor confesses that she had to look up the word "barangay" on Google. A fellow workshop participant is telling me to include more "context clues," citing a passage where a character travels from a place to another. I am urged to describe *more*, even though going beyond naming feels like saying that a house is a box with a roof, a few doors, and several windows. Trouble isn't far when characters in fiction have to commute. Not everyone, I'm often reminded, has laid eyes on a jeepney, or a pedicab: carriages that residents of my town—any Philippine town—usually take. I receive question marks whenever I ferry a character on a pedaled contraption we call a *trisykad*. I fail to recognize a parallel in English—"rickshaw," a word I never turned to because it didn't wobble. "Rickshaw" seems, to my ears, almost stylish.

There is a point in the workshop when the comments become obscure. How much of this problem is my own, how much my readers' inability to comprehend?

One participant points out how I write some bits of dialogue in Tagalog and Cebuano, and without blinking, says, “It cheapens the writing.”

Some of them come to my defense, or try to distance themselves from the perceived foolishness of the remark. No, the dialogue doesn’t bother them. And please, writers like Junot Diaz do the same thing. But in his next question, I hear something sincere, ignorant, and startling. “Do Filipinos speak English mixed with native words? Like the characters in your stories?”

“It depends on who’s speaking,” I hesitate. Yes. And no. We speak native and foreign all at once. I stop myself when I notice what I am about to do. Explain myself to them.

The question, I begin to see days later, is a glimpse of how my English sounds in a particular way to a native speaker. The question troubles me more when I notice that it doesn’t stray far from a criticism back home. Why write in English when most Filipinos use it only when they have to?

I want to believe in a narrative, in Chinua Achebe who declares, “I have been given this language and I intend to use it.” I want to believe in the story of a writer who inadvertently elects himself as his own translator when writing, on its own, becomes an act of translation.

After the workshop, I walk to a bodega to buy cigarettes. What New Yorkers call “bodegas” are tiny fluorescent-lit building spaces that sell grocery items, from gum to umbrellas, and in certain neighborhoods way uptown, poppers. Back home, *bodega* is simply a stockroom. Before leaving, I pick up a magazine from the display. There’s an article about a movie based on an Allen Ginsberg poem. The piece comes with snapshots of the actor playing Ginsberg in the movie, and those of the real Ginsberg. A photo shows the poet standing in profile, his body tilting toward the pages he’s reading from. It could have been taken a few blocks from where I’m standing. Then I recognize another face on the photo.

Jose Garcia Villa is sitting in front of Allen Ginsberg. Villa is the Filipino poet who, in one poem, refuses to be called a Filipino. He is slender and forlorn in his knit sweater, the look on his face a cross between indifference and grief. The magazine editors could not identify him in the caption.

Is this what we aspire to become, we who write in this language? Three blocks later, I remind myself that I am prone to melodramatic introspection that typically lasts a few hours after a workshop. Poor Villa, the easy scapegoat.

IN WINTER, East Harlem looks like it has been tossed out the window. Stacks of filthy shoveled snow border every street, the pavement sheathed in a hard patina of ice. Every day I walk five blocks to the train. Three of those blocks are big avenue blocks. The blisters between my toes that burst on my first week here have long calloused. Today, I am meeting my friend Del at her apartment, and from there, we will head down to a New Year's Eve party in Brooklyn. Tomorrow, it will be a year and half since I arrived, and four months before I leave.

I walk past the feeding shelter for the homeless around my block; the roomy Laundry Basket of First Avenue where I read Tolstoy's *The Complete Short Works*; the delis run by young Middle-Eastern men; the only Patsy's in the Barrio; the Korean cleaners; the softly-lit Mexican pubs; the funeral home patronized by African American families; the row of fast food chains on Third Avenue; the Chase on 116th; the Catholic church wedged between old brick tenements; the tall, roguishly handsome Italian guy at the pizza joint above the Uptown stop.

On the 6 Train, I take a spot closest to the sliding doors, as I always do when a car is not full. Four stops later, we're on Eighty Sixth Street, Lexington. I dash out, clear the two flights of steps on the frantic Upper East Side stop as though I were the only person there. Soon I'm pacing across wet sidewalks down to Third Avenue.

When I get to my friend's apartment, a shot of gin is waiting for me on the table. Del quickly tells me a story of how one of her cats scaled the metal door to the shower and then, out of terror, shat from his perch.

On the 4 Train to Union Square, Del talks about the party, the friends waiting for us, the DJs who went to Skidmore with her. Del and I met at the university where we are taking the same graduate degree. We attended a workshop in fiction and after a few sessions, became confidantes. Del is gutsy and affectionate, but also ready to cut down anyone who wronged those whom she cares about. One night in a karaoke bar, a man grabbed the microphone even though the monitor was playing my song. A few friends from graduate school were also at the bar, but it was Del who took the microphone and, chastising the man, said, "Look, pal. It's my friend's turn. Let him sing." Her father was from Medellin, Colombia, and her mother, the daughter of Irish immigrants who settled in Astoria, Queens. "Don't I look more like a fucking *gringa*?" she said the first time we talked about our families. I feel the gin settling in, undoing the knots in my shoulders. The prospect of warm bodies and noise sweeps over me.

Before reaching Midtown, the 4 is halted because of traffic ahead. At past six p.m. people are huddled, fabric-to-fabric. Someone, a man with a warm voice, finds space to ask for spare change. A Tagalog ballad drips through my earphones; I ride the waves of its swooning anguish. Two years ago, I heard the same song inside a jeepney caught in rush hour, and I wished I were somewhere else. People back home frequently refer to places abroad as *gawas*, literally: “outside,” as in “outside of the country.” Every time I get off the train, I think: *This is what it's like outside.*

After a subway ride, the city bursts open like a new country. The sky doesn't glare; it gazes back. Funny how they say you can't see the sky in New York. It's all I notice, the pointedness of color, light's soft angles. Before, it's harder to see because of too much sun.

People in the streets hold a certain gaze. The look of people who are glad to be here and want to cling to that idea for as long as they can. After more than a year, New York City seems to me a glittering, feverish, wounded place that nobody wants to leave.

Del and I wait for the L train on Fourteenth Street. A few stops later, we climb into Williamsburg.

A WEEK BEFORE New Year's Eve, my father and I have a talk. He calls from a port somewhere in California. He has always been away, working overseas. Our interactions were limited to requests, commands, asking me what's on TV, telling me off for having my left ear pierced, congratulating me for finishing college. This time, I pick up something else in his voice. The way he eases into my observations, not quickly becoming skeptical of my anecdotes. There's trust behind every word. Something about our both being apart, and also away from home, has leveled the field, brought us closer.

I tell him I'm still single. He gamely asks why. I can sense him testing the air, wanting to find out how far I'd go.

“In case you were wondering,” I say.

“You've always been single,” he says. “Because you don't like girls.”

“That's not going to change.”

“There's nothing I can do about it?” he asks.

"It is what it is," I say.

My father knows—and, I suspect, has known much earlier—that his only son is gay. It's a subject that's hardly been touched on, dismissed with flippant remarks about how I'd become his and my mother's caretaker when they grow old and I end up without a spouse. There has been no other talk on the subject. Not until this call.

"Someday I will find someone," I say. "And you'll have to meet him."

"I'm afraid of that," he says, after a pause. "But it's your life. I can't tell you how to live."

For now, I tell myself, this will have to do.

DEL'S FRIENDS MEET us outside what looks like a foreclosed commercial building. One of them is Gia, a short, athletic Italian girl from New Jersey. I tap the right front pocket of my jeans, checking if I've brought my passport, an uneasy habit I've acquired.

Since I wasn't able to get a City ID, I have to bring my passport with me every time. A bouncer at a bar once refused to let me in after I presented my Philippine Tax Identity Number card, which I had laminated some years back at a bookstore in Davao. "This your ID?" the bouncer said, sneering at the typewritten script on the card. "I could make this in my apartment."

"Why? Do you have a typewriter?" I said, and he let me in.

For this New Year's Eve party, apparently, nobody's going to get carded; there are no bouncers at the front steps. Inside, we can hardly move. Music pounds over our bodies as we head down to where the drinks are being served, right by the DJ, in a cellar with walls covered in white Japanese paper. We get our drinks and stay in the cellar. At midnight we peck each other on the lips. We dance.

We climb back to the ground floor, and Del introduces me to Neal. Neal has on an impeccably cut grey coat with a hoodie over two layers of shirts and tight jeans. He is tall, possibly biracial, arrestingly good-looking. He tells me he's starting an online business, the details of which I quickly forget. To catch what I'm saying, he moves his head closer to my face, like he's about to yell something in my ear. He nods a lot, pretending to hear when I tell him that I go to school with Del, and that I live in East Harlem, although I'm not from New York. Like a shift in mood, I

sense Del's attraction for him. Perhaps she could tell that I too find him attractive. We leave Neal to the few people he came to the party with and who are unmoved to acknowledge us. Soon the DJ starts playing, strangely, music from the 1990s. At some point, Kim Wilde's "Kids in America" comes on. When the chorus erupts, I watch the kids bouncing wildly, kissing the new, innocent year with alcohol-soaked teeth.

Something heavy falls behind Gia, a young man who looks as though he came to the party by himself. He's been drinking from a bottle of Wild Turkey all night, says a stranger who is helping Gia and I lift the young man. We carry him past the surging, indifferent crowd and lay him by the side entrance. Gia calls 911. I am relieved to notice that the vest the young man is wearing is lined with fleece. Passersby assume we know him and they gape at us. One of them yells, "Get it together!" The stranger who helped us slips back into the building. I am suddenly reminded of Elijah's co-worker, the man the faggots had left in the snow to bleed.

From the tide of people coming and going, a girl with dirty blond hair recognizes the man at our feet.

"We've been looking for you!" she says, but she doesn't address Gia who is crouched protectively over the young man.

"He's my friend," she tells us. "I *know* him."

"Let's go back inside," says Del.

"No," Gia says. "Not until the police gets here."

Two middle-aged Polish men, who must have seen us from a window high up across the street, come down to inspect. They inform me that they thought the young man was dead and that we needed help with the body.

"Call 911!" one of them screams at Gia. "911!"

"I did and I'm staying with him until they get here."

"Look lady," the blond girl says. "This guy is my friend. I'm a friend of his sister's. We came here together."

"Leave him with her," Del tells Gia.

“Not until the ambulance is here,” Gia says. “I called them. They’ll look for me because I’m the one who called. I’m the one who’s going to have to talk to the police.”

“Then I’m not going anywhere,” the girl says.

It takes a while, but the ambulance comes. In the end, the girl does not thank us.

We walk across the street and turn a corner. Music and voices splinter under a clotted sky. Gia phones her girlfriend who lives in Miami. She bursts into tears when she begins telling her what just happened.

Del and I step away from her to smoke. Neal stumbles out of the building, walking over to us.

“Is she going to be okay?” he asks.

“She’s too nice,” says Del.

“That kid was lucky she was there when he passed out,” Neal says, his angular features enhanced by a sparse beard, a stray mole hovering above his left brow.

“You coming in?” Del asks me.

“Not yet.” I look over at Gia.

“I’ll stay here with them.” Neal smirks. Del ignores him and, clasping her arms, shuffles back to the building.

Even though I try to deny it, alcohol has become a dangerous part of our bond. A month ago, Del and I went to a cottage filled with kegs in Bushwick, then moved to a packed warehouse party with a five-dollar toll, only to be shut down by members of the New York Police Department who had received a complaint from a homeowner. A year later, Del will write to me to say she has decided to get sober.

Neal offers me one of the cans of beer that he’s stuffed in his coat pockets. I tell him the story of how Del and I met.

“You’re not from the States?” he says. “Where are you from?”

“The Philippines.”

“Like, you grew up there?”

“Born and raised.”

“In Manila?”

“In the south. Davao City, in Mindanao.”

“How long have you been staying here?”

“Almost two years.”

There are times when I actually think it won’t come. But usually it does. Tonight, it glints on Neal’s eyes.

“Your English is *good*.”

When not in the form of a question, it arrives as a compliment. I have a familiar accent, I am better at this than Filipinos they know who grew up here. I am “thorough.” Different utterances, same bewilderment: How come you know this language so well? It is very hard not to think of the shipload of American teachers who came to the Philippines more than a century ago, how they got us to this point: a native speaker admiring my ability to speak his language, like I’ve performed some magic trick. Would he ask me the same thing had I been from Hong Kong instead, or Canada, or Nigeria? Not one Filipino living back home merely happens to be good at the language. Perhaps it’s ridiculous to others, how an incident that took place more than a hundred years ago could still cause unease; but it’s always there, rearing its scaly head in every new encounter. This morsel of history is obscure to my friend in Brooklyn and, I understand, to many others. It doesn’t escape me that this awkward encounter has been made possible, again and again, by my American-funded study grant.

“I mean,” Neal says, “I mean, I thought you just have a regional accent.”

“We have children back home who talk like they grew up here,” I say and instantly regret it.

“So,” he says. “What’s home like?”

I think of my parents’ house, the smell of burnt leaves in the morning, the discreet tumble of words that aren’t foreign. Neal lifts the can of beer to his chest, waiting for me to speak. The icy wind over Brooklyn whistles through our hair.

“Warm,” I tell him. “Really warm.”